Part 2: New Realities For the Committed Documentary

Chapter 4

Documenting Chinatown's Workers

Introduction

A feature of the massive proliferation in small documentary making since the early 1970s has been a diversification of the sites of production from which committed documentary films emerge. In this chapter, I explore the small documentary making activities of the Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA), a workers’ membership organization serving Chinese workers in New York City’s Chinatown and surrounding areas. The CSWA’s documentary making activities, orchestrated by the CSWA Video Workshop, provide an illustration of participatory documentary making and the making of small documentaries to service the communication needs of workers drawn from a distinct ethnic/immigrant community. The group’s activities directly descend from Challenge For Change and similar participatory programs of 1960s and early 1970s, and illustrate the adaptation of the participatory film production model to serve the needs of a non-traditional workers’ organization—one which has emerged and evolved to meet the unique historical conditions operative within New York City’s Chinatown at the end of the twentieth century.

During its period of greatest activity, between the early 1990s and the early 2000s, the CSWA Video Workshop generated numerous short video documentaries
to assist the CSWA’s advocacy campaigns, thereby illustrating, in parallel with the CSWA’s emergence as a non-traditional workers’ organization, the emergence of a previously unseen site of documentary film production linked specifically to the experience of low income ethnic workers within the area of New York City known as Chinatown. To explore the documentary making activities of the CSWA Video Workshop, I focus in this chapter on three features of this ethnic workers’ association’s work. First, I examine the distinct characteristics of the ‘host’ organization, and explore how the CSWA differs from the kinds of labor or community advocacy organizations that have sponsored the making of documentaries in the past. Second: I provide a description of the themes and formal style of some of the documentary videos produced by the CSWA Video Workshop, and explore how these videos address political themes not seen in earlier committed films. And third: I explore the communicative role of the documentaries made by the CSWA Video Workshop and how these videos are received by viewers allied with the CSWA, or by anonymous unaffiliated audiences.

New sites of production for workers’ documentary making
As an organization, the CSWA and its origins can be traced to the array of social, economic and political conditions that have served to shape New York City’s ethnic Chinese community. Historically, Chinatown’s labor force was poorly organized and politically powerless (Kwong 1987). Prior to the 1960s, the majority of Chinese workers were employed in small service-orientated businesses where employees were
recruited from inside a business owner’s family or village community. The cooperative character of these businesses prevented the emergence of clear class based demarcations between workers and owners, and Chinese workers were prevented from developing a clear class consciousness despite the low wages and poor working conditions they experienced. In his study of the reshaping of Chinatown since the 1960s, Peter Kwong argues: “there are dozens of merchants’ associations of all types, but not a single traditional organization has formed around workers. In fact, the very idea that workers should organize into unions that cut across clan, village, and trade lines is an alien concept” (1987:137). In addition, mainstream American labor organizations were, historically, usually unwilling to organize workers within Chinatown; in part, argues Kwong, “because of their own racial attitudes” (1987:137).

Beginning in the 1960s, the character of employment in Chinatown began to change, and by the 1990s small and mid size manufacturing businesses had replaced small family owned businesses as the primary source of employment for workers, with garment manufacturing featuring prominently among these new manufacturing businesses. With the arrival of these businesses came a serious division between labor and capital and the growth of large and clearly defined working class (Kwong 1987:139). In addition to the arrival of manufacturing in the area, there were by the 1970s roughly four hundred and fifty Chinese owned restaurants in Chinatown, and another thousand or so more spread throughout the New York City metropolitan area. The restaurant industry, employing service working dishwashers, kitchen staff,
delivery workers and floor staff, served, alongside garment factories, as second key area of employment for unskilled Chinese workers, including many recent immigrants.

In the late 1970s workers at a number of the area’s restaurant businesses, working on their own initiative without professional labor organizing assistance, successfully unionized and were reluctantly admitted into Local 69 of the AFL/CIO Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union. However, Local 69 was a "typical business union, more interested in collecting dues than representing its members" (Kwong 1987: 142). When the union failed to enforce contracts negotiated between its membership and the businesses in which they worked, the CSWA was born as a worker-led alternative to the union. Once formed, the CSWA quickly expanded on its initial membership of restaurant workers to include workers from other trades, including construction workers and large numbers of workers employed in the garment industry.

Various kinds of associations have long played an influential role in the social and political life of Chinatown. From the late nineteenth century onwards, traditional ethnic associations provided the Chinese community with a social support network, recreational activities, and served as the community’s de facto governing bodies. Chinese immigrants were largely barred from participating in mainstream cultural or political institutions by anti-immigrant sentiment, racism, the language barrier, and by their unfamiliar social practices. Ethnic associations with members drawn from family, district, merchant or guild affiliations, and modeled after mainland Chinese
associations, served to provide mutual aid and support for their members (Kuo 1977:17). In the face of discrimination from Euro-American society, the Chinese associations became a powerful presence in the community and provided "an inner government capable of controlling social behavior, protecting itself against the larger society, and monopolizing certain lines of business in the community" (Kuo 1977: 18).

Following the Second World War, the influence of the traditional associations diminished as social service organizations serving all members of the community rose to the fore.ii In turn, in the late 1960s, the social service style associations were joined, and in some areas eclipsed in influence, by militant groups formed by radical students and Asian-American activist. These more militant groups were inspired by the political thinking of the New Left, and by the community self-help activities of the Young Lords and Black Panthers, who were active during this period in New York City's Latino and African-American communities (Kuo 1977, Kwong 1987). The CSWA is an inheritor of these varied lineages: as an organization it has a distant connection to traditional ethnic associations, insofar that these organizations played a role a fostering community solidarity in the face of hostility from Euro-American society, and direct connections to the political organizing of radical late 1960s activism. Indeed, some of the individuals behind the launch the CSWA in 1979 trace their political education to their early involvement in radical Asian American organizing in the 1960s.
Although an inheritor of these varied organizational models, the CSWA illustrates a somewhat different organizing model. Describing the differences between the CSWA and the traditional associations as they exist and operate today, CSWA Executive Director Wing Lam argues:

Chinese Staff is [the] only worker organization in Chinatown. The other groups range from family associations, or people who come from the same village… in the past they served some function, but now they're basically more like landholders. Because they don’t represent the people they claim to represent (November 24, 2004).

In the same breath Lam distances the CSWA from the contemporary social service organizations. These, he says, use:

money from the government to provide certain services to the people in the area. But I think gradually they try to become power brokers… they are not power brokers in the sense of representing poor people… they use poor people to bargain for money, but essentially they power broker for developers (November 24, 2004).

The changing nature of Chinatown’s associations illustrates the changing needs of the community, and the evolving relations between the community and wider American society. Within this history, the emergence of the CSWA can specifically be linked to a significant increase in Chinatown’s population following changes in U.S. immigration law during the 1960s, iii and to the needs of workers as Chinatown experienced massive re-industrialization from the late 1970s onwards. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the association’s character and organizing strategies have been deeply informed by the emergence of ‘just-in-time’ manufacturing processes,
and the sub contracting of garment manufacturing to small Chinese owned garment companies.

Today, the CSWA claims to have a membership of "1,300 workers from various trades and ages, injured and non-injured, documented and undocumented and a leadership composed primarily of women" (Chinese Staff and Workers Organization, n.d.), and is recognized nationally as leading organization for garment industry workers.\textsuperscript{iv} In organizational structure, the CSWA illustrates a participatory development model of social activism in operation, one where the design and implementation of political and social programs are in the hands of workers and program constituents rather than in the hands of service providing professionals. The CSWA believes workers should be the agents of political change, and that they should not be viewed or treated as the victims of socio-political conditions over which they have no control. The prominent role of women within the association can be attributed to the huge concentration of female workers in Chinatown’s garment industry during the 1980s and 1990s.

The CSWA is not a labor union, nor does it seek to recruit its membership from within single industries in the way many labor unions do. Currently the CSWA is engaged in campaigns to hold manufacturers accountable for wages and conditions in the garment industry, organizing workers in the restaurant and other service industries, for the overhaul of the workers’ compensation system, and to provide relief for low-income residents in Chinatown and the Lower East Side post-9/11 (Chinese Staff and Workers Association n.d.). In addition to engaging in these
advocacy efforts, the CSWA provides its members with legal advice, English language classes, family recreational activities, and a youth group.

**The CSWA Video Workshop**

The CSWA inaugurated the CSWA Video Workshop in 1993 to provide the association’s members with access to portable video production and editing equipment and training in its use, so that these members can author their own videotapes. Then, as now, the CSWA seeks to use the production of short documentary videos as a way to assist with the association's outreach and advocacy campaigns. According to CSWA Video Workshop participant and CSWA board member Betty Yu, the workshop is designed to allow workers to tell their own working-life stories (August 25, 2003). She argues: the CSWA Video Workshop enabled "young people to document their own lives and working conditions. It was pretty fascinating to see that there was this tool, this alternative media tool, that they could use to tell their own stories" (August 25, 2003).

Funding for the CSWA Video Workshop was initially provided by Manhattan's public access television station Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN), through a community media grant program designed to foster media production by diverse not-for-profit community based organizations. The small annually renewable grant from MNN allowed the CSWA Video Project to purchase some simple video equipment and to initiate training activities for its members. As part of the funding agreement with MNN, the video productions generated by the
project would be presented for cablecast on MNN's public access television channels. According to Yu, the young people who initially sparked the creation of the video workshop were soon joined by a full spectrum of the CSWA’s membership; including, she says, "older immigrants, garment and restaurant workers, injured workers have been taking it up… older workers who don’t speak a word of English… or who didn’t know what a computer is or how to operate one” (August 25, 2003).

As with the majority of community media projects designed to serve the communication needs of non-profit organizations, the activities of the CSWA Video Workshop are motivated by ‘prophet’ not ‘profit’ motives, and the workshop’s participants were motivated by a desire to draw attention to the plight of low wage workers in Chinatown, and counter the way Chinese workers are viewed in American life (see Juhasz 1995). According to Yu, one of the immediate aims of the video project is to provide an alternative to the Chinese ethnic press and media and to counter the way the ethnic press and media report on labor issues. She argues:

[the workshop aims to] document the immigrant worker's experience, it's not what the Chinese media is telling everyone the worker's experience is. It's us telling what the experience is, and to tell not only the community internally… but to put something out beyond Chinatown. Telling folks outside that we're fighting back. We're not happy to work long hours. We're not happy slaves (August 25, 2003).

In his discussion of diasporic film and video production, Hamid Naficy argues that immigrant communities commonly turn to alternative or non-commercial media channels as a way with which to circulate media productions aimed at preserving cultural identities, or to represent or sustain ethnic or cultural practices. Naficy argues
that cable television and the opportunities offered by leased access and public access cable systems are a useful site for the airing of these 'narrow' and 'low-cast' productions and for "helping ethnic and displaced populations form and maintain cultural identities" (2001:44). Media making activities of this kind are usually initiated by entrepreneurial individuals within a particular community, or by ethnic institutions formed to serve the interests of the community.

The work of the CSWA Video Workshop corroborates Naficy’s argument, but with an important distinction: the workshop’s focus on the political education and mobilization of workers indicates that unlike many video projects launched by immigrant groups, the CSWA Video Workshop is not primarily concerned with the maintenance or formation of an ethnic identity. Instead, the video workshop seeks to foster an ethno-class identity; one that straddles working class and ethnic identifications, and in the process seeks to highlight how economic and ethnic discriminations have worked synergistically to marginalize Chinese workers. Thus the identity-in-formation in the CSWA Video Workshop’s work is not strictly speaking an ethnic one: instead it is class based identification, coupled with the recognition that the racially motivated marginalization of Chinese workers directly impacts both their economic and social status. This interplay between class and race will be explored more fully in the next section where I discuss some of the documentaries made by the project, but the primacy the CSWA Video Workshop places on issues of class, and the way this distinguishes their work from immigrant or
‘identity’ based media projects where the focus is the formation or maintenance of cultural identities, cannot be overstated.

An additional noteworthy feature of the CSWA is that although the CSWA primarily draws support from among Chinese workers, it is not a solipsistic organization, nor one that seeks to serve this ethnic constituency in isolation. Seeking to establish horizontal cross ethnic identifications between workers from diverse backgrounds, the CSWA commonly operates in coalition with workers’ or ethnic organizations serving other New York City communities. As with the cross ethnic partnerships in which the CSWA engages, the activities of the CSWA Video Workshop have often been advanced through ties with non-Chinese committed documentary ventures, including collaborations with the Downtown Community Television Center (DCTV) and the guerilla video collective Paper Tiger Television (PTTV) described in the pervious chapter. I highlight these ties because there is a tendency to isolate diasporic or ethnic media production activities from the wider cultural landscapes of which they are feature. More pointedly, by acknowledging the extensive ties between the CSWA, the association’s video workshop, and other organizations I seek to avoid the erroneous tendency of viewing Chinatown as a community that is perennially isolated or ‘other’. The CSWA and its video workshop are uniquely adapted to meet the needs of the immediate community they serve, but they are in no way removed from the political aspirations of workers from other communities, nor are they unaware of the documentary or activist media activities in which other workers’ or advocacy groups are engaged.
Themes within the workshop’s documentary videos

Mirroring the campaign activities of the CSWA, the documentaries made by the CSWA Video Workshop address a variety of themes including campaigns for workers’ health coverage, back-wage campaigns against restaurants or garment businesses, and campaigns to counter the stereotypical or racist depiction of Asian workers. There are a number of challenges when it comes to exploring the content of these documentaries: the video workshop’s documentaries are circulated primarily through intimate local networks, and once their utility in advocating for a particular issue has passed, the actual videos may not be preserved. In addition, the works created by the CSWA Video Workshop are not self-contained or individually authored works to which conventional textual or auteur theory can be applied. Instead, within the collectivized media making activities of the project, authorship is of little importance, and footage or recorded video segments may be repeatedly reedited or recycled to suit the immediate needs of the association’s political advocacy efforts.

For instance, to fill a twenty-eight minute on-air timeslot on Manhattan’s public access television channels, members of the video project may edit on a single video cassette a completed self-contained documentary, a selection of roughly edited interview footage, a rough introduction updating viewers about a recent campaign, and other elements. When presented on public access television these compiled shows might be titled simply CSWA News. At the same time, other videos, such as the
twenty-nine minute CSWA: Workers Testify Against Long Work Hours in D.C. Hearing (Chinese Staff and Workers Association, 2003) or the fifty-eight minute Save the Lower East Side and Chinatown Hall Meeting (Chinese Staff and Workers Association, 2003) consist of documentation of public forums or panel discussions and cannot be described as documentaries. Here, I propose to discuss three self-contained documentary videos made by the project, however, in all likelihood these productions have been excerpted or rearranged at some time to suit the immediate communication needs of the CSWA.

Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace

Made in 1994, the eight-minute long Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace (Chinese Staff and Workers Organization) was the first videotape made by the CSWA Video Workshop. This short documentary presents some of the events that occurred during a seven-month strike by CSWA affiliated restaurant workers against the owners of Chinatown's Silver Palace restaurant. The version of documentary I watched was primarily in English, with English subtitles provided in the short Chinese language sections. Yu states: “all the videos have two versions, they are the very same cut but one is either subtitled or [has] a voice-track in English, and one which is clean, in Chinese for a Chinese audience” (August 25, 2003). Voice-over dubbing is, she says, more common than the use of subtitles since subtitling is technically complicated and more time consuming than the adding of a dubbed voice-over. Yu also indicates that in some situations the workshop has preferred to make
their videotapes in English since this encourages the development of English language skills among the CSWA’s membership: English is also used because it makes the videos accessible to non-Chinese audiences, or, sometimes, because it is the only language shared in common by Chinese immigrants from different regions of China.

The events *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* depicts illustrate an important moment in the history of labor organizing in Chinatown. Restaurant workers make up a large section of the area’s working poor and it was the failure of AFL/CIO affiliated unions to adequately advocate on behalf of these workers which led to the creation of the CSWA. In 1980, workers at the huge Silver Palace restaurant successfully pressured their bosses for a forty-hour work week with overtime pay, payment of the minimum wage, health insurance and other benefits, and in this way the Silver Palace became the first unionized restaurant in Chinatown. However, as *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* chronicles, in the early 1990s the Silver Palace's owners sought to rid the restaurant of union employees. CSWA Executive Director Lam says that the workers’ struggle at Silver Palace launched the CSWA’s documentary making activities. The CSWA Video Workshop began, says Lam:

around the Silver Palace workers. It was picketed for seven months. At that time some of the young people wanted to document it, and that's when we started off. That was the first one, and they go off to some film festivals and get awards (laughs). Since then we feel that this is a very worthwhile project. It not only involved young people, it also involved the worker (November 24; 2004).
In its textual content and syntax, *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* is typical of many works by the CSWA Video Workshop. It begins with a brief historical overview of labor organizing at the Silver Palace restaurant delivered by a voice-of-god narration. This is followed by short interviews with striking workers as they walk a picket line outside the Silver Palace restaurant, interviews with representatives of the CSWA (taped in the CSWA’s small office off Canal Street in Chinatown), observational style footage of protestors outside the restaurant as they chant slogans and hand information flyers to passersby, and footage of embarrassed strike breaking workers and customers as they pass the picket line to enter the restaurant.

As with many CSWA Video Workshop productions, *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* is primarily testimony-driven, through the presentation of statements made by strikers and CSWA representatives. Speaking in Chinese, a young male interviewee describes how the restaurant’s bosses steal the tips left for workers by customers. An older woman describes being arrested after she refused to leave the restaurant when the bosses failed to give her a paycheck she was owed. A third interviewee describes his struggle to pay rent while making only a few dollars an hour. He states: the protest is to “stand up against gang violence, to send a clear message, this cannot continue.” Unlike conventional news reports where testimony and statements of this kind are framed by the comments of an on-location professional correspondent or a studio based news-anchor, here the testimony of the
striking workers and their allies is delivered in rapid-fire succession without editorial framing of this kind.

By representing the picket line as a central site of political activity, *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* falls in line with a long history of leftwing political documentaries where the depiction of protests is at the forefront. The marriage of acts of political protest and the political documentary is a natural one, at least insofar as these occurrences illustrate dramatic moments of political activity. Events of this kind are also visual in character, emotionally charged, and once recorded on film or video they can be telescoped to distant audiences. As is also the case with many other protest depicting documentaries, including the workers newsreels described in earlier chapters, *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* relies for its effectiveness on providing simple visual proof of the organizing efforts of workers. Thus, formal experimentation, or the construction of a complex narrative, is not a feature of this or similar videotapes. Instead *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* draws its rhetorical strength from the direct visual evidence its footage presents, and the through the direct testimony of the individuals interviewed.

The absence of extensive narrative frameworks within this, as with many other short activist works, illustrates a distinction between feature-length narrative documentaries where events are seen to longitudinally unfold within the arc of a time-based narrative, and those where the focus is on the delivery of direct evidence. While labor themed films such as Barbara Koppel’s *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1977, 103 mins) are constructed to depict the unfolding of events over months or even years (films of
this type begin with something that appears to be the causality of the events they depict [the cause of a strike] and end with something that appears to be the resolution of the events they depict [the winning or collapse of a strike], *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* and other works by the CSWA Video Workshop are less concerned with telling the story of a strike or protest than with presenting a series of declarative statements about the strike or protest. This approach illustrates a rejection of conventional narrative, and the declarative testimonials included are presented as unassailable evidence of truth.

The presentation of a series of declarative statements within *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* curtails the development of a complex chronology-based narrative, one that would remove the events depicted from the time and space occupied by the viewer. Christian Metz argues that narrative by nature "has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world and opposes it to the 'real' world" (1974:17). In this way, argues Metz, the creation of a narrative leads to the creation a temporal environment that is elsewhere to the temporal present occupied by the individual viewing a film. This Metz contrasts with “description” where, he indicates, the formation of a second narrative-determined temporal plane does not take place (1974). Instead, when a viewer is presented only with a description of events, they are encouraged to believe that the events they see or hear are taking place in the same temporal time zone as the one that they themselves occupy.
Metz's distinction between narrative and description offers a useful separation between works such as *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* (and the many activist works to which it bears similarity) and more mainstream political documentary productions (such as Koppel’s labor related films). This is a distinction between the narrative re-telling of events that are known to be elsewhere, and the description of events that appear to be taking place in the viewer's here and now. When applied to actual documentary productions, we discover the division between these two forms is porous. Nonetheless I believe that the absence of extensive narrative storytelling within works such as *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* indicates that the value of these works as tools of political transformation is thought to lie in their ability to represent conditions in a way which seems to occupy the same here and now as the viewer, rather than the construction of a self contained narrative which appears to be elsewhere. When the makers of activist documentary videotapes such as *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* talk of a need to immediately impact viewers, this can be interpreted as both a perceived need to put time-sensitive work into the public arena quickly, and a need to produce works that appear to exist in the same temporal zone as its audience.

Today, the CSWA recognizes that early works such as *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* had weaknesses: while the depiction of strikes or protests serves an important news function within the community, short documentaries focused in this way may tell viewers little about the deeper and complex socio-political relations that underlie the lived experiences and disenfranchisement of
Chinatown’s workers. Lam notes, as early as the making of *Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace* in 1994, he realized that workers’ documentaries needed to serve a larger role than simply increasing the visibility of protests. He argues:

> [Our] struggle has a history. People might feel kind of forgotten. Or sometimes workers might be misinformed by other people. The tape serves multi-purposes, [as] a educational material for outreach, [as a record] for the future… it will help to further educate folks. Also when people put their thoughts together, work together, and create a relationship—the people who produce it—they are in the middle of social change (November 24, 2004).

Lam continues: while early works by the workshop depicted single strikes or campaigns, “we want [now] to talk about the long term… to illustrate not just the battles, but also stories about the injured worker. Individual stories. That kind of video" (November 24, 2004).

**Countering hegemony: challenging the isolation of Chinatown**

The short documentary *New York Times, Jing Fong and the Myth of Happy Slaves* (Chinese Staff and Workers Association, 1995, 24 mins) illustrates the sophistication of the videos made by the CSWA Video Workshop during the mid to late 1990s. As the title suggests, this documentary sets out to explore some of the ways that stereotypical images of Chinese workers as model workers sustain a climate where labor practices thought unacceptable in other communities are, when applied to Chinese workers, thought acceptable.

*New York Times, Jing Fong and the Myth of Happy Slaves* focuses on three interrelated themes. First: in an approach similar to *Organizing For Justice Against*
Silver Palace it focuses on a series of protests, this time against Chinatown's Jing Fong restaurant, by employees and former employees who claim that the restaurant routinely violates Federal labor laws. Second: the videotape criticizes how the Jing Fong labor dispute was reported by the Chinese ethnic and mainstream news media. Here, the documentary argues that the Chinese ethnic press is consistently hostile to workers’ issues, and serves as a mouthpiece for Chinatown’s business community. In tandem with the videotape’s critique of the Chinese ethnic press, it also specifically targets the way in which The New York Times’ reporter Jane H. Lii reported this and other Chinatown based labor disputes. And third: the videotape seeks to situate the Jing Fong restaurant protest, and the way the protest was reported by the media, within a larger historical context; including an exploration of the connections between Chinatown’s business hierarchy and human trafficking by Chinese gangs, the conservative stance of the traditional ethnic associations, and the links between the gangs and the traditional ethnic associations.

In a style similar to the approach used in Organizing For Justice Against Silver Palace, New York Times, Jing Fong and the Myth of Happy Slaves begins with testimony from striking workers, in this instance, workers on the picket line outside the Jing Fong restaurant. One fired restaurant worker testifies that when working at the restaurant his workweek: "averaged seventy hours a week, I also had to work holidays. I was paid overall less than 75 cents an hour… in addition to no overtime [pay], management would steal our tips." The videotape proceeds with testimony from other individuals who argue that by failing to enforce labor laws, it is the U.S.
Department of Labor which must take ultimate responsibility for the conditions under which Chinatown's workers toil. In one interview, a representative of the CSWA argues that the protests seen in the video are not driven by efforts to unionize workers or to seek arbitrary pay raises, their aim is simply to force the restaurant to pay workers the minimum wage mandated by the Federal Government. Another interviewee draws attention to the illegal smuggling of undocumented workers by the Chinese gangs or ‘tongs’: he indicates that the owners of the Jing Fong restaurant have connections with Fukienese associations, and these associations are connected with human smuggling, including the infamous Golden Venture incident.

Next, *New York Times, Jing Fong and the Myth of Happy Slaves* turns to an exploration of how protests, strikes, and other organizing efforts by workers in Chinatown are depicted in the news media. One of the long standing goals of the CSWA Video Workshop has been to make available to workers news reports which reflect the experiences of workers, and to thereby counter the pro-business opinions presented in the commercial Chinese ethnic news media. Interviewed in 2004, Lam argues that when it comes to the reporting of labor issues, the ethnic press is, as it was in the 1990s, unsympathetic to workers. He argues:

>[reporting on workers issues in the ethnic press is] pretty bad, very conservative, very commercial. At most they give you a picture that doesn't tell much detail. And they always portray the employer better, in a better light. In the printing they even go as far as to put a color employer picture and black and white worker picture… the bad guy in black and white (November 24, 2004)
However, the CSWA proposes that these negative representations of Chinatown-based labor organizing are not limited to the ethnic press. CSWA staff organizer JoAnn Lum argues: "the New York mainstream media tries to paint a picture of the Chinese Americans as hard working, exploited people who accept slave labor conditions because of something 'Chinese'." ix Mirroring this argument, in an interview featured in New York Times, Jing Fong and Myth of Happy Slaves, Lam argues that stereotyping of this kind fosters an image of the Chinese as model workers who are unfazed by poor working conditions, and who accept low pay and long working hours as an inevitable feature of life. In the videotape he testifies: "everybody knows Chinatown is like a plantation, but now The New York Times explains the reason Chinatown is a plantation—because the Chinese like it [that way]."

In New York Times, Jing Fong and Myth of Happy Slaves, The New York Times’ reporter Jane H. Lii is specifically targeted as a source for the media stereotyping of Chinese workers. Her reports, testimony delivered in the video proposes, reinforced racist and stereotypical images of Chinese workers and undermined the CSWA’s organizing efforts by spreading misinformation about the nature of the Jing Fong dispute. One worker interviewed in the video argues: Lii has reported "Chinese culture and American labor laws are not compatible." x Another interviewee, videotaped on the picket line outside the restaurant, adds: Lii's reports use "race to promote pro-business kinds of positions." A third observes: "having a Chinese reporter makes white people think, well it must be true, it's a Chinese person
The CSWA is resigned to the fact that reporters servicing the Chinese ethnic press will write unfavorably of workers’ organizing efforts, since the Chinese ethnic press is owned by and accountable to the Chinatown business community (Kwong 1997b:133). What is irksome for the CSWA about Lii’s reporting is that it seems to replicate in The New York Times the pro-business and anti-worker stance of the Chinese ethnic press. For the makers of New York Times, Jing Fong, and the Myth of Happy Slaves, reporting of this kind provides the ideological alibi necessary to excuse federal, state or city agencies from conscientiously enforcing labor law inside Chinatown.

Underlying the criticisms New York Times, Jing Fong, and the Myth of Happy Slaves makes regarding media coverage of workers’ issues is an attempt to show that within Chinatown workers hold a subaltern status vis-à-vis both the Chinese business elite and the wider non-Chinese society. The videotape proposes that through a process of strategic self-orientalizing by the business elite, workers are assigned economic expectations that would be considered unacceptable in other ethnic communities. To establish this point, New York Times, Jing Fong and Myth of Happy Slaves seeks draws attention to the presence of two orders of discrimination facing Chinatown’s workers. First: the class discriminations operative within the community as the Chinese business elite seeks to preserve its hegemony by ensuring workers remain compliant to the needs of employers—despite the harsh and poorly paid conditions in which workers labor. And second: the racial discrimination that emanates from the host culture, thereby keeping Chinese immigrant workers isolated
from mainstream society. Linking these two discriminations, one interviewee in *New York Times, Jing Fong and Myth of Happy Slaves* states: “we have external exploitation—[and] Chinese exploiting Chinese.”

**Garment Factory Workers/Tears in Chinatown**

The third short documentary by the CSWA Video Workshop I will discuss seeks to further reveal the forces which isolate Chinese workers within the Chinatown ethnic enclave, thereby enabling their continued exploitation. For the making of the documentary *Garment Factory Workers/Tears in Chinatown* (Chinese Staff and Workers Association, 1994, 13 mins), members of the video workshop interviewed tourists visiting Chinatown and asked them on-camera what they think of the area. In the editing room these statements were inter-cut with statements from Chinese teenagers employed in garment factories. In one quickly edited sequence early in the video, a young European American visitor to the area comments: “It’s pretty eclectic, the flavor of the old country if you will, in the heart of New York.” These comments are followed by the testimony of a garment factory-working Chinese teenager who states: “The most I earn is around $50 a week, sometimes [I earn] nothing.” This is followed by an interview with CSWA organizer Lum who argues: “A lot of these teens end up working in the [garment] factories while they’re in high school, and sometimes even younger, because their parents make so little money.” This statement is followed by more street interviews with tourists: two young European American women comment that they have filled their shopping bags in Chinatown, and a man
adds, “the working conditions look OK.” This last comment is immediately followed by grim images depicting the interior of a sweatshop, and an interview with a Chinese speaking youth who states: “I’m a seamstress and a student… I work twelve hours [a day] usually, some days less… maybe if I am lucky, I make about one hundred dollars a week.”

In this way *Garment Factory Workers/Tears in Chinatown* juxtaposes the experiences and invisibility of sweatshop-employed immigrant youth with the experiences of privileged European American teenagers. It also seeks to build a correlation between Chinatown as an exotic tourist destination and Chinatown as the site of appalling sweatshop manufacturing conditions. In this way *Garment Factory Workers/Tears in Chinatown* seeks to illustrate that the Chinatown of today still serves for many as an exotic location outside mainstream society, just as it has been throughout much of the area’s history, and this marginality is today sustained to serve business interests at the expense of workers.

When watching these documentaries one may be prompted to ponder how accurately these depictions represent the reality of life for working people in Chinatown. As with any process of representation, the works of the CSWA Video Workshop can only depict partial truths. However, there is evidence to corroborate the CSWA’s basic argument that Chinatown’s restaurant, garment factory, and other workers suffer serve economic depravations, including restricted access to health care, unsafe or illegal working conditions, and wage levels that permanently hold

ethnic enclaves… are a trap. Not only are immigrants doomed to perpetual subcontracted employment, but the social and political control of these enclaves is also subcontracted to ethnic elites, who are free to set their own legal and labor standards for the whole community without ever coming under the scrutiny of U.S. authorities (1997b:12).xiii

This ethnicity-based isolation allows Chinatown's elite to exercise considerable power over workers, giving credence to the CSWA’s argument that workers face exploitation at the hands of the Chinese business elite and must therefore find or create sources of news information that are not tainted by the agenda of the business hierarchy. Furthermore, sociologist Jan Lin argues that Chinatown is today still commonly represented in the mainstream media and entertainment industries as an exotic ‘elsewhere’. She argues:

[Chinatown is depicted as a place of] mystery and surreptitiousness… a district pervaded by organized crime, vice industries, and depravities associated with illegal immigrant smuggling and sweatshop activity. These images are continually reinforced by tabloid sensationalism, prime-time police and detective television serials such as *NYPD Blue*, and Hollywood films that feed societal demand for lurid sights and violent scenes (1998: 171).

Lin concludes, these orientalizing representations of Chinatown reinforce the ethnic, racial and geographical separation of Chinatown from wider American society, and illustrate that in the minds of many people Chinatown still serves as an exotic ‘elsewhere’ and a home to a perennial ethnic ‘other’ (1998).
The political effects of the CSWA Video Workshop’s documentaries

The CSWA Video Workshop seeks to use documentary video making as a tool with which to contest labor conditions and political hegemonies within Chinatown. Broadly defined, the CSWA seeks to use documentary video as a means by which to assist the organization’s grassroots political organizing and to reaffirm the solidarity of the CSWA’s existing membership. How well the CSWA Video Workshop achieves these goals is not easy to quantify. Media critic John D.H. Downing observes that the difficulty of measuring the effects of media production leads, for the producers of independent or alternative works, to a paradox. He argues: given that many independent media makers are disenchanted with the mainstream media’s perceived failure to reflect the varied political beliefs of viewers, "is it not predictable that they should be absorbed with knowing their own users' reactions?" (2003: 627). However, Downing indicates that for a number of reasons alternative media makers are usually not well equipped to study the effects of the media they make; including the "colossal effort needed, especially when activists are unpaid, to launch and sustain media projects, leaving little over for audience research" (2003: 627). For a group such as the CSWA Video Workshop, engaging in a far-reaching study of the impact of their documentaries on audiences is simply not a practical option. However, the absence of a study of this kind does not mean the CSWA has not learned quite a bit
about how the videotapes they make are ‘used’ by audiences, and the effects they have on these audiences.

To accurately consider the effects of the media made by a group like the CSWA Video Workshop, we first must dispense with the conventional interpretive frameworks used in mainstream media effects analysis and instead examine the unconventional production processes and distribution activities in which a project such as the CSWA engages. In her discussion of participatory media production Shirley A. White offers a distinction between “process” centered participatory media making, and “product” centered activities (2003c:64). Within process centered participatory video making practices, White argues, the videotape serves as “a tool to facilitate interaction and enable self-expression. It is not intended to have a life beyond the immediate context…once those purposes have been achieved, the tape itself is no longer valuable” (2003c:65). White elaborates that process-centered video making works to develop personal skills and competencies among those involved in media making activities; it creates dialogue among group members, strengthens group or individual identities, and helps to “define goals and outline courses of action” (2003c:65). Process centered activities of this kind foster a “transactional model” of communication, where meanings and interpretations emerge through dialogue between those participating in the media making (2003c:75). In contrast to ‘process’ based participatory media making, a ‘product’ centered approach to media making places primacy on the production of self-contained works, and on the ability of these works to transmit information to distant audiences. The activities of the CSWA Video
Workshop illustrate a mixture of ‘process’ and ‘product’ focused activities, with strong tendencies towards a process-based approach.

**Process based media making: internal effects**

Within the collectivized documentary video making activities of the CSWA Video Workshop, workers, their families, youth, and members of the CSWA engage in shared documentary making activities. Among the participants active in shaping the content and messaging of the association’s documentary videos are the individuals trained as technicians and who operate cameras or editing equipment, the campaign leaders or CSWA staff members who shape the association’s policy positions and campaigns (and usually provide feedback about the content of the videos made), and other constituent participants who may contribute to the video production process or the dialogue and idea sharing which surrounds the actual video making. Although a driving force behind the CSWA Video Workshop’s activities is a desire to communicate messages beyond this primary group, participatory media making is designed also to build group cohesion and solidarity, and to reinforce shared goals and identifications among these primary participants. White argues, participatory processes allow individuals to be “better able to think about and articulate social action that they believe would improve their well-being” (2003:38); she adds, the use of video in this way “can serve as a powerful force for people to see themselves in relation to the community and become conscientized about personal and community needs… it has the potential to bring about personal, social, political, and cultural
change” (2003c:65). This is the initial or primary layer of participatory media making; a layer where the negotiation of meanings, identities, interpretations, and the formation of collective action frames takes place among core project stakeholders and their close allies.

When theorizing the effects of the media there is a tendency to assume that media makers and media audiences are two separate and never-meeting social constituencies. For participants in the CSWA Video Workshop, there is no clear separation between media making and media viewing. Workshop participants use video cameras to record advocacy efforts by their friends, co-workers and colleagues. Later, as roles rotate, individuals who were behind the camera may find themselves in front of the camera. In this way the project breaks down the division between those who are active in making media representations, and those who are passively represented in the media. Yu observes: the video workshop “is about being a garment worker or a restaurant worker and taking on your employer. Then taking a camera and documenting it” (August 25, 2003). This participatory model transforms people from being “‘objects’ of communication, learning, and research, into active ‘subjects’ who are shaping their life space, through knowledge and action” (White 2003:34).

Within the circularity of a production process where workers are both the subject of representations and control the making of representations, the sense that the documentaries made reflect reality, is heightened. As I stated earlier, within the collectivized production activities of the CSWA Video Workshop, individual authorship is not important. This is true, but for the workshop the issue of authorship
is of enormous importance insofar that the credibility of its documentaries rests on their being made by workers, or at the very least, being made by ‘insiders’ experientially linked to the experiences of workers. In her formulation of political mimesis and documentary film, Jane M. Gaines argues that audiences watching political documentaries see on the screen a politicized body with whom they develop an identification, and are thereby moved to actions in solidarity with these individuals (1999). Within the circular participatory process of the CSWA Video Workshop, viewer-makers may quite literally see themselves or their co-workers or known allies on screen, and be motivated to new or continued political advocacy efforts through identification with this intimately familiar on-screen subject.

**Screenings/discussions and collective action framing**

The CSWA Video Workshop orchestrates regular public screenings of their documentary videos: screenings take place at a variety of sites including the CSWA’s Manhattan and Brooklyn offices, at locations maintained by partner or allied organizations, and during outdoor public screenings in Chinatown parks. The CSWA Video Workshop has also occasionally screened its videos at film festivals, and when CSWA members are asked to make presentations in educational settings such as colleges or high schools, they will often also screen one of the association’s videotapes as a part of their presentation.

When questioned on the communicative role of the CSWA’s documentaries, Yu explains that the works made by the workshop are not conventional stand-alone
productions. Instead, they are most effective when presented to audiences in community settings where discussion and other forms of participation can be fostered among the attendees. While the workshop’s productions are, she continues, adaptable to varied screening environments including television or film festivals, the primary importance of the workshop’s videos lie in their relation to the grassroots organizing activities of the CSWA. A grassroots community based organizing screening could, she says:

be as small as a screening of a very rough tape of a demonstration that someone has shot… to engage people who didn't come out to the event. They're working very long hours and they can't come out to an event… so they are able to watch the tape at the [CSWA] office or at a meeting space and informally have a discussion around it. Not critiquing the composition of the video or the creative aesthetic aspects of it, but talking about the content, the issues (August 25, 2003).

These public screening events are intended to facilitate the creation of shared meanings and interpretations among audience members, while recruiting participants for additional organizing campaigns and actions.

The informal screening scenario Yu describes offers us insight into the organization-wide practices of the CSWA. On a daily basis the CSWA's offices are used to host a variety of worker-centered activities, including political strategy sessions, English language classes, legal advice consultations, and video screenings. Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, in her study of women’s activism within the contemporary anti-sweatshop movement, contrasts the informal character of the CSWA’s storefront workers’ centers with the hierarchical and bureaucratic character
of mainstream workers’ organizations and labor unions (2001). Louie argues that out of political necessity, the CSWA’s daily operation mirrors the "just-in-time" production practices common within labor-intensive sub-contracted industries like the garment industry (2001). Just-in-time manufacturing practices forces part-time workers to work long hours when there are orders to be filled, and leaves them jobless when these orders are completed." She elaborates: "in many ways, the low-waged immigrant workers' organizations are the flip side of the ‘just-in-time’ production methods pursued by corporate management" (2001:217). Storefront offices, of the kind operated by the CSWA in Chinatown and Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, serve as places where workers on irregular working schedules can drop-in to interact with their peers, or to learn about the latest developments in workers’ advocacy campaigns.

These informal settings also serve, as Yu illustrates, as places where workers can watch recently recorded video footage depicting events they were personally unable to attend because of the demands of their working schedules. Yu acknowledges, out of a desire to serve Chinatown’s most marginalized workers, those workers who are "tunnel-visioned because they are working twenty hours a day,” the CSWA has deliberately sought to create workers’ centers where individuals can drop-in and participate whenever and however they can (August 25, 2003). Yu describes her own first exposure to the work of the CSWA Video Project at one of these informal office-based screenings:
It was a screening at the Chinese Staff office on Catherine Street, in a small little office… you go up two back alleyways. There were thirty or forty of us. Young, old, intergenerational, mainly immigrant, mainly immigrant teens and mainly immigrant workers. I thought: what was significant about it was that it wasn’t just about preaching to the converted, it was about reaching out to members and their families, their children, maybe their friends… I remember this being the first small screening that I went to with Chinese Staff and I was really impressed with the quality of the video… I was just amazed. It was very emotional. These were experiences that reflect my own life, you know, your parents working in sweatshops, working long hours. What it really does to your life, your family… how deteriorating these conditions are in your life, your family. It was very emotional for me to see that these were immigrant teens themselves… going out and shooting these videos (March 17, 2006).

At screenings of this type, the screening of a video serves to foster discussion and interaction among attendees. Yu adds:

Once the screening is over, the emphasis is on a discussion of what we’ve seen and— the most interesting part of that is that when it’s not just people who are involved already, it’s when new people feel compelled to get involved. Feel compelled to get involved in the organizing because they just saw this story of a garment worker working long hours… to me those are the most interesting discussions. Post-screening discussions. When it’s like this collision of old members, active members, and people who are just getting involved. And talking about how are we going to come together and find common ground to fight these conditions (March 17, 2006).

CSWA executive director Lam elaborates that one of the strengths of using videotapes in this way is that video is both an accessible way of educating workers about political issues and conditions and they are entertaining for workers. He argues: “one of the most popular recreations day-to-day is people watching video. There is no theater. A few years ago Chinatown had a theater. Now we don’t have a theater. People see videos… I think everyone has a VTR” (November 24, 2004).
Lam adds: the videotapes screened at the workers’ centers are not limited to those made by the video workshop, the CSWA will also arrange screenings of videotapes depicting other political struggles or films depicting less overtly political themes if they are thought to have some educational merit. He continues:

We like to show movies and have a discussion. It's a good activity to inspire people. [We] use film to popularize…the idea of educating folks. [Also for] people [who are] not very good at reading… I think video helps much more than written language in terms of popularizing ideas… sometimes even when [workers] have a good education [they have done] enough work already today (November 24, 2004).

I propose we can describe the informal screenings hosted by the CSWA, and the repeated playing of CSWA Video Workshop produced videotapes in the CSWA’s storefront offices, as the use of documentary video to provide workers with a ‘just-in-time’ documentary experience. The use of documentaries videos in this way is intended to provide workers within information about occurrences in ongoing CSWA campaigns, to introduce new or potential CSWA members the organization’s community organizing model, or to re-invigorate the participation of existing members, all through the informal and often spontaneous storefront exhibition of videos. The impact of these screening or screening-discussion activities on viewers defies easy quantifiable measurement, but it is known that at video screenings attendees frequently verbalize a commitment to future participation in the CSWA’s campaign activities and thereby indicate, in that moment at least, that the viewing of the videotape and the discussion accompanying it has impelled or sustained their commitment to the organizing work of the CSWA.
Evidence and anticipated evidence

An ancillary ‘effect’ of these making activities on actual political outcomes is the impact of the video apparatus and video footage as a form of, what I term, ‘anticipated evidence’. The sight of a video camera, and the presumption that it is recording taped evidence for future public display can change the way in which an event, meeting or action unfolds. It can legitimize political actions in the eyes of participants, passersby, or in the eyes of those against whom a protest of action is organized. It can lead protestors to organize their protests more cohesively as they perform for their future imagined audience; and it can change the behavior of police or counter-protestors. Yu recalls:

On the picket line outside Silver Palace, the management has sent gang members to attack the picket line. Several times we're documented this, and this has been really integral, a key tool in protection while we're on the picket line. We had the camera shooting directly at the person who was coming to attack us, they saw the camera and there was a different reaction... there was quite a different reaction when it was being documented (August 25, 2003).

In addition to this anticipated evidence function, video footage can serve as actual evidence. Yu adds: “in many cases video documentation has helped us in legal cases.” (August 25, 2003). The ability of video cameras to provide visual evidence, including for possible use in legal actions, makes them an essential feature at most public political actions, including those organized by the CSWA.
External effects: the finished documentary as product

In addition to their internal function within the CSWA, the documentaries made by the CSWA are intended to be viewed by anonymous audiences and to influence the opinion of these audiences. This occurs primarily through the submission of videotapes for airing on public access television: throughout the mid to late 1990s the CSWA Video Workshop regularly aired its productions on Manhattan’s public access television channels, thereby reaching a potential audience of more than 600,000 cable television subscribing homes in Manhattan. Exact viewership numbers for these channels are not available, making it impossible to know how many actual subscribers were watching these airings or the demographic composition of those who were watching. In her study of American public access television, Laura R. Linder indicates that public access’s viewers tends to be older, lower in income, and better educated than the average television viewer (1999).xviii In areas with significant immigrant or ethnic populations, public access television commonly facilitates the production and airing of local programming meeting the communication needs of these communities. For instance, Minneapolis’ public access television station airs eight hours of Somali language programming weekly, targeting the area’s 20,000 strong local Somali community (Arke 2004:15).xix Similarly, Naficy, in his study of television and the lives of Los Angeles’ Iranian community, argues that community access television can play an important role in building and maintaining community cohesion while maintaining the distinct cultural identity of ethnic groups (1993). For faith-based organizations, seniors, the disabled, and many other constituencies, public
access television facilitates the ‘narrowcasting’ of targeted programming, sometimes to quite sizable viewing audiences.\textsuperscript{xx} Yu argues that it is common for Chinese workers living in dormitory style accommodation to share cable TV subscription fees in order to access cablecast Chinese language TV programming including public access TV airings (August 25, 2003).

However, the conditions experienced by Chinese workers, including low pay and long and irregular working hours, suggest that even if this is the case the documentaries made by the CSWA Video Workshop may only reach small audiences of Chinese workers when they are aired on cable TV. Instead, the audiences for these televised cable airings are likely to be primarily incidental channel surfing viewers or individuals generally predisposed to watching public access television programming. While these viewers may glean new information from watching these airings, they do so in a context where information acquisition is at the forefront, and not in a context were they will be propelled to take actual political actions. This does not indicate that these stand-alone airings have no value—they do. But here the value of the airings lies in influencing the political consciousness of viewers and not in generating the immediate tangible effects that would follow from directly impelling viewers to any particular course of action, as may occur when the documentaries are screened for the members of the CSWA or there immediate allies.
Conclusion

The documentary making activities of the CSWA can decisively be situated within a history of committed documentary film making stretching back to workers’ newsreel making of the 1930s and the participatory film making activities of Challenge For Change in the late 1960s. The CSWA Video Workshop seeks to create short documentaries that are able to counter the hegemonic anti-worker and anti-poor ideologies that sustain the cyclical poverty endured by disenfranchised workers within Chinatown: to this end, the focus of the CSWA Video Workshop is to create and maintain an "oppositional consciousness" among Chinatown’s workers (Mansbridge 2001). Jane Mansbridge defines oppositional consciousness as:

An empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination… at a minimum, oppositional consciousness includes the four elements of identifying with members of a subordinate group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices. A more full-fledged oppositional consciousness includes identifying a specific dominant group as causing and in some way benefiting from those injustices. It also includes seeing certain actions of the dominant group as forming a 'system'… that advances the interests of the dominant group. (2001:5)

She adds, oppositional consciousness is not the natural outcome of oppressive conditions, indeed, under conditions of maximum oppression dominant forces may have such control over the ideas in circulation that the "conceptual categories required to challenge the status quo hardly exist" (Mansbridge 2001:4).xxi

For an oppositional consciousness to emerge, individuated experiences of marginality or economic disenfranchisement must be recognized to be the
consequence of discernible patterns of collective economic, ethnic, gender, or racial bias. In the works of the CSWA Video Workshop we see an attempt to use committed documentary making as a tool with which to explore, to draw attention to, and to counter the operation of these biases as they apply to Chinatown’s workers. Specifically, the documentaries made by the CSWA Video Workshop seek to illustrate that conditions experienced by Chinatown’s disenfranchised workers are not the natural or inevitable outcome of ethnicity, race, immigration, or economics. Instead they seek to show that these are conditions are produced and sustained by a web of socio-political and economic relations; ones that support extreme forms of capitalist exploitation and poverty in the heart of one of the global economy’s most highly developed regions.

While the tangible effect of the CSWA’s committed documentary making activities is impossible to quantify, it is clear that these activities are viewed by members of the CSWA as a valuable component of ‘process’ centered self-empowerment for the association’s members or allies, and a useful communication device for ‘product’ driven external messaging. These activities can productively be examined in relation to other recent ventures where film has been employed as a tool of political and class consciousness-raising. For instance, Newsreel offers a useful counterpoint to the activities of the CSWA Video Workshop. In a 1973 study, Bill Nichols notes that participants in Newsreel recognized early on that the production of documentaries was itself not enough and a completed work could “never stand alone”
Instead, to be politically effective, the exhibition of a film must be situated within other organizing activities or consciousness-raising discussion sessions.

In other ways the CSWA Video Workshop illustrates the fruition of approaches proposed by Newsreel, but never fulfilled. One idea put forward by Newsreel was that participants in the group should engage in a work-furlough program where members would secure employment in blue-collar jobs, thereby positioning Newsreel’s members to participate in the development of a revolutionary proletarian consciousness in the workplace (Nichols 1973:10). In hindsight, this idealist gesture seems somewhat naïve, and reveals that many among Newsreel's early membership were privileged European American students seeking to position themselves as a radical political vanguard. Today, the CSWA Video Workshop takes for granted Newsreel's ambition of linking documentary making with the lives and experiences of workers, and within the CSWA Video Workshop it is workers themselves who tell of their own stories through the making of documentary films, and depict class based struggle as they themselves experience it.

Although the CSWA continues to be a dynamic presence in Chinatown and celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2009, since the late 1990s the activities of the CSWA Video Workshop have slowed. In the early 2000s, the tiny back alley office that had served for a decade as the collective’s editing room and tape storage was vacated and early videotapes, many of them in now obsolete hard-to-view formats, were threatened with destruction before their transfer to the CSWA’s Sunset Park office. One explanation for a decline in the workshop’s activities lies in the
difficulty of sustaining all-volunteer documentary making activities over a long period of time. Over time, key project participants may turn their attention to other non-video political advocacy efforts or simply tire of participation in unpaid documentary making activities. The departure of these experienced participants can signal the end of a collective project, or lead to a period of dormancy until other motivated participants emerge. Lam argues, video making is challenging for hard-pressed workers:

People have no problem with the camera… but the editing is the hard part… [post] production is very [time] intensive. Our people don’t have a lot of time. People are overworked. Some people don’t have employment, they keep looking [for jobs]… they're unsettled. And the ones who work, they work so long they don’t even have time for their families (November 24, 2004).

A second explanation for the decline of the CSWA’s documentary making in the 2000s lies in dramatic changes in Chinatown since September 11, 2001. Garment manufacturing, for two decades the largest employer in the area, has largely relocated out of Chinatown since 9/11.\textsuperscript{xxiii} This migration has created new hardships for workers, put new demands on their time, and forced workers to migrate to new garment production areas or to seek new types of employment.\textsuperscript{xxiv} The re-zoning of Chinatown by NYC’s City Council has also led to new high rise condo and hotel construction; which is displacing low income residents and pressuring the low income service workers who work in the area to make long daily commutes to Chinatown from more affordable residential neighborhoods in the outer boroughs of NYC.
However, a third important explanation for a decline in documentary making by the CSWA lies in the emergence of the Internet, and in the ability of the CSWA to both maintain a general level of public visibility through its website, while, in partnership with the CSWA’s sister organization National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS), being able to post roughly made short videos or footage from press conferences, protests, or other events, to Internet video-on-demand sites such as YouTube and BlipTV. In contrast to the kind of documentary videos suited to airings on public access TV, where the production of polished television-style productions running up to 28 minutes in length was encouraged, more easily and more quickly made short videos and information-delivering raw footage are well suited to Internet video distribution through these video-on-demand sites. This is a topic I will revisit in later chapters since it illustrates one of the ways that new technologies, and the advent of convergence culture, are today redefining the parameters of the committed documentary project. Just as the introduction of video technology and an accompanying rise in small documentary making redefined the field of committed documentary production from the 1970s onwards, the emerging distribution opportunities afforded by the Internet and video-on-demand digital content websites are redefining the committed documentary project by providing new avenues for the circulation of politically committed work.

\[1\] Members of the CSWA refer to the association’s video making activities interchangeably as the video “workshop” or video “project”. For the sake of consistency I will use the name CSWA Video Workshop. Also, although the CSWA is also colloquially referred to as...
“Chinese Staff” by its staff and members, throughout this chapter I refer to the association by its full official name.

These associations still play a limited role in preserving a conservative class based hierarchy within Chinatown, and today they are viewed as clannish and believed to be linked to the Chinese gangs.

The Immigration Act of 1965 dramatically changed the eligibility of Chinese immigrants to legally enter the U.S. Between 1960 and 1980 there was a 241.4 percent jump in the U.S.’s Chinese population, from 236,084 to 807,027 (Kwong 4:1987). This ongoing influx has today greatly expanded long established Chinese communities such as those in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, and led to the emergence of large new concentrations of Chinese immigrants, including in New York City’s Flushing, Queens and Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

For additional information about the CSWA see Kwong (1987) and Louie (2001).

To view Chinatown in isolation is to fall into the trap of essentializing the area and ignoring that Chinatown is not a stable or pre-existing location. Instead, it is constructed by cultural, political and economic pressures, and in constant dynamic dialogue with national and global processes (Haugerud 2003:64).

For instance, CSWA News #9 (1994, 28 mins) begins with a formerly self-contained 13-minute documentary titled Garment Factory Workers/Tears in Chinatown, followed by a lengthy and largely unedited interview with CSWA Executive Director Wing Lam. The reuse of media-content, and the insertion of this media-content into magazine format television productions, complicates the application of the term ‘documentary’ to these productions.

Elsewhere in the documentary videotape CSWA staff organizer JoAnn Lum notes that Jing Fong appropriated 30% of workers tips. This is a violation of labor laws prohibiting management from taking workers’ tips. The worker interviewed in the videotape was fired for resisting his bosses’ illegal actions.

On June 6,1993, the Golden Venture, carrying 286 would-be illegal immigrants from mainland to China to the U.S. ran aground off New York City’s Rockaway Beach. The passengers on the dilapidated steamer had paid large fees to trafficking ‘snakeheads’. Had the voyage been successful, the illegal immigrants on board would have been forced to live as modern day indentured servants until their debt to the snakeheads was paid off (Kwong 1997).


Although this quotation appears prominently in the videotape I have not been able to identity an article by Lii where it appears.

Conceived in this way, Chinatown's relationship with broader Euro-American hegemony in New York City cannot be defined simply in terms of 'minority' or 'majority' cultural membership. Instead, in a fashion similar to many postcolonial contexts, two sets discriminations are in operation. First: anti-Asian and anti-immigrant discriminations generated by Euro-American society. And second: discriminations between the ethnic minority's subaltern workers and the ethnic elite that employs them (Loomba 1998:199). Ironically, Chinatown's business elite has been successful in maintaining the community's isolation by reminding their co-ethnicist workers of New York City’s long history of anti-Asian sentiment. Reminded of this history, workers can be dissuaded from seeking to join unions by the argument that unions will (as has often been true) do nothing for Asian workers except demand membership dues. Similarly bosses can argue the reason wages are so low within the garment industry is not the fault of Chinese sweatshop employers, it is solely the fault of the constraints placed on Chinese bosses by Euro-American garment manufacturers.
Rey Chow argues that the acceptance of pre-existing and stable ethnic categories accepts the "view that ethnics are... aliens from elsewhere, (it) in fact ends up lending support to the concept of ethnicity as an a priori, essential condition of foreignness" (2002: 34). This, Chow argues, conceals that it is political relations that generate the meanings and parameters of ethnicity, and that these parameters are sustained through legal, economic and cultural practices (including, as is pertinent to this example, through the mass media representation of exclusive ethnic identities, or the representation of Chinatown as an isolated and inward looking region).

In his studies of the social relations within Chinatown sociologist Peter Kwong largely corroborates the arguments made in New York Times, Jing Fong and Myth of Happy Slaves, Organizing For Justice at Silver Palace and Garment Factory Workers/Tears in Chinatown (1987, 1997b). Kwong argues that Chinatown today operates, as it has for most of its history, differently to other ethnic communities. Chinese communities have tended to remain isolated in ways other ethnic communities do not because they were shunned by European America society. Today, he argues, this isolation is sustained through the rigidly defined patterns of employment in which Chinese workers find themselves. In the past European immigrant populations would initially settle in ethnic enclaves but as employment opportunities opened up to them they would move into more highly paid and prestigious blue-collar industries. Once in these jobs, they would work alongside native-born workers or immigrants from other countries, learn English, and cease to be defined solely by their membership of an ethnic group. However, Kwong argues, with the collapse of New York City's blue-collar manufacturing sector, immigrant employment has shifted to a de-centralized system where sub-contractors are the major employers. Within this employment system, Chinese workers find themselves working for Chinese bosses in small businesses located within the ethnic enclave. Here workers have little contact with individuals from outside their immediate ethnic community, they have few opportunities for economic advancement, and they may never learn to speak English.

Downing argues, within participatory video making, the video maker moves from being situated as "us the objects" of media representation made by others, to being "we the subjects" of media representation (2003:630). He elaborates: the elision of difference between those who are represented, those who represent, and those who watch representations of themselves or others like themselves, turns media making and viewership into a "constantly circulating switch of hats" (Downing 2003: 630).

Louie notes that manufacturers extol these methods with such "code words as 'flexibility,' 'lean and mean production,' 'diversification of risks,' and 'right sizing'" (2001:217). These practices indicate the replacement of large union staffed manufacturing facilities with small non-union or weak-union shops where wages are suppressed in contract bidding wars. One of the great ironies of the Chinatown's garment manufacturing industry is that many of the workers are unionized, including those shops where workers earn less than minimum wage (Kwong 1987:147-8).

Yu fondly remembers as a teenager watching The Uprising of '34, George Stoney's documentary about labor activism in Southern factories during the Great Depression. Yu describes being particularly impressed that Stoney had arranged for the simultaneous translation of the film's dialogue into Chinese, through the use of audience headsets connected to a translator (March 17, 2006). Stoney's support for the CSWA's documentary making activities provides a direct tie between Canada's participatory film project Challenge
For Change program, which he headed in during the late 1960s, and the 1990s participatory documentary making work of the CSWA.

xvii Alexandra Juhasz argues that within collectivized activist video making of this kind, the audience is situated as a co-creator in the generation of a video’s meaning. She contrasts the participatory dialogues generated at screening events of the kind Yu describes, with dominant theories of media reception which either, in the case of Frankfurt school-inflected theories, situate viewers as “lemming-like viewers who… cannot tell the difference between opinion and objectivity,” and Birmingham School inflected theories that limit the viewer to a position of “alienation, negotiating, or resisting” what they see or hear (1995:17). Juhasz argues, correctly I believe, that neither of these theoretical approaches provides an adequate understanding of a viewer’s experience when watching images they “need to see” (1995:17).

Juhasz elaborates: “The production and viewing of alternative media involve a willing and often sought-out dialogue among producer and audience because the people involved need the dialogue; they need lifesaving information, they need to see their lives and problems represented with dignity, need to hear politically inflected interpretations of the issues which effect them, and need to speak to each other about what they know” (1995:7). While the focus of Juhasz’s study is video activism responding to the AIDS crisis, parallels can be drawn with other activist video projects, including those involving women’s issues, the homeless, minorities, or, in the case of the CSWA Video Workshop, immigrant and ethnic workers.

xviii Linder credits this finding to a study by David Atkin and Robert LaRose—“Cable Access: Market Concerns Amidst the Marketplace of Ideas.” Journalism Quarterly. 68 (Fall 1991): 354-62

xix This is the official figure. Community members estimate the actual figure may be twice as high.


xxi Jane Mansbridge defines oppression as: "the unjust use of power by the more powerful against those less powerful and more vulnerable by virtue of their social position. Conceptually, oppression usually applies to groups rather than individuals, and it is used when members of more powerful groups use their power to take advantage of members of more structurally vulnerable groups" (2001:3).

xviii CSWA Video Workshop productions from the early 1990s were mastered on 3/4” U-Matic videotape. It is now becoming difficult to find working U-Matic videotape players.

xxiii This was initially caused by the area's isolation in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, but it is also linked to post-9/11 development and re-zoning in the area. According to CSWA director Wing Lam, today there are very few Chinese workers engaged in the garment industry; those who are employed in this field commute to midtown Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and even more distant locations such as Philadelphia.

xxiv I asked Wing Lam how, in light of a dramatic decline in manufacturing in Chinatown since September 11th 2001, the outreach activities or organizational structure of the CSWA might change in coming years. Lam responded that these changes in have already altered the way in which the CSWA performs its worker outreach. In the past, he says, "all we needed to do was stand at the subway station (Grand Street) and leaflet. But now it is so spread out. Now you can see more people taking the train from Brooklyn to midtown." However he argues: “Chinatown still a center. Cultural and all that… people work in Connecticut but they still come back here. People even work in Miami and they look for job offers here, people go to (Chinatown based) employment agencies from as far away as Puerto Rico” (2004).